Abstract

The gig economy is rapidly transforming service-based industries, including online teaching. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic forced millions of people worldwide to work remotely, gig economy teaching generated billions of dollars in revenue and was responsible for millions of lessons per month. Although the global labor market is currently experiencing a major shift because of the gig economy, applied linguists have paid little attention to gig-based work and its implications. The current study narrows this research gap by using self-branding theories to understand the ways in which gig economy teachers market themselves to potential students. The findings, which are based on 100 teacher profiles, reveal that teachers adopt four self-branding discourses when marketing their teaching services. These self-branding discourses may vary according to the teacher's country of origin, professional qualifications, and first language background. The study argues that self-branding discourses reflect a larger, and perhaps more problematic, global trend in which individual workers directly compete against each other in a race to lower earnings and job security.

Keywords: gig economy, self-branding, language teaching, online labor market, native speaker

Gig Economy Teaching: On the Importance and Dangers of Self-Branding in Online Markets

Introduction

The global economy is experiencing a major shift in the labor market. The rise of the "gig economy," which refers to jobs that are carried out on a piece-meal basis through digital intermediaries (Sundararajan, 2016; Vallas & Schor, 2020), is transforming the labor market by providing greater opportunities for customers and service providers to directly do business. The digital intermediaries that power the gig economy are disrupting traditional business and growing rapidly. For instance, Uber alone has 3.9 million drivers (Uber, 2020), and the size of the gig economy is projected to grow from approximately $250 billion dollars in 2019 to $455 billion dollars by 2023 (Statista, 2019).

One rapidly growing sector of the gig economy is language teaching. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic forced millions of people worldwide to work remotely, online tutoring platforms (OTPs), such as iTutorGroup, were valued in the billions of dollars. OTPs are poised to grow even more in size and popularity given ongoing social distancing measures and the rise of remote work, though there are fears that the gig economy will drive down wages and living conditions in a "race to the bottom" as gig workers underbid each other to win jobs (Graham, Hjorth & Lehdonvirta, 2017).

OTPs offer compelling reasons for teachers and students to engage in teaching and learning. Teachers can participate in a "planetary labour market" (Graham & Anwar, 2019), and students have unprecedented access to an immense pool of instructors. Crucially, students can select prospective instructors according to race, gender, country of origin, languages spoken, and a wide variety of other criteria. How students select prospective instructors is based, in part, on

how language teachers market their services. This unique situation of teachers marketing their services directly to students has the potential to transform commonsense notions of teaching and learning. For example, schools traditionally hire language instructors according to, among other things, education and experience, thus establishing to students and their parents what is an ideal teacher. The gig economy, conversely, allows teachers and students to co-establish, through direct participation in the market, notions of what it means to be a good or successful teacher.

Within this market-based system, the current study examines how teachers brand themselves on one of the largest OTPs (hereinafter referred to by the pseudonym "LanguaSpeak"). Using theories taken from branding scholarship, the investigation explores how OTP teachers commercialize their experiences and argues that their discursively constructed identities reflect the outcome of neoliberal forces. By neoliberal forces we refer to the increasing marketization of nearly all aspects of society alongside a decrease in governmental regulation and government funding of social programs (Shin & Park, 2016). The study thus attends to the following research question: How do teachers market themselves on OTPs using self-branding discourses, and to what extent are these discursive strategies a reflection of their participation in the gig economy? The answers to this question contribute to larger discussions of teacher identities, neoliberalism, political economy, and language ideologies by demonstrating how neoliberalism broadly—and the gig economy specifically—force teachers to engage in ever-escalating practices of self-branding.

Literature Review

An understanding of the self-branding discourses constructed by language teachers requires identifying the economic and competitive environment from which technological advancements compel individuals to become brands. To this end, the review of literature first

establishes what is known about the gig economy and how its technological affordances portend potentially drastic changes for language teachers. This discussion is then followed by a review of scholarship on political economy and language education.

The Gig Economy

Although considerable debate exists around what falls under its purview (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016), the emergence of the gig economy can be dated to the Great Recession of 2008 and the founding of Uber and Lyft (see Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2016; Srnicek, 2017). The gig economy relies on digital intermediaries that connect buyers and sellers for short-term "gigs." Industries are being rapidly reconfigured under the gig economy because digital platforms efficiently address two long-standing and thorny economic issues: matching and idle capacity. Idle capacity refers to underutilized physical assets, such as the spare seat in a car or the extra room in a house (Frenken & Schor, 2017; Sundararajan, 2016). Matching refers to how digital platforms can, in theory, seamlessly connect buyers and sellers (see Kuhn, 2014). The powerful benefits of matching can be identified outside of the gig economy itself and are affecting how people connect socially. For example, companies such as Match.com and OkCupid have applied sophisticated matching algorithms to the field of online dating (Abolfathi & Santamaria, 2020).

The gig economy is profoundly shaping the ways in which language teaching and learning are managed. In simple economic terms, the gig economy creates new learning spaces while increasing the service market, providing students with greater access to teachers. Greater access is ostensibly beneficial to students in that they can select instructors according to their needs and wants. However, OTPs, like many industries disrupted by the gig economy, operate within regulatory gray areas that do not often require playing by traditional labor rules (Prassl, 2018). In the case of language teaching, for example, instructors are designated as independent

service providers, leaving them without the same legal protections and labor rights typically granted to employees working at schools and universities.

Many gig economy platforms require little interaction between customers and service providers (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). Research notably observes the occupational problems associated with work being "invisible" and "remote," or what Gray and Suri (2019) call the stress of "ghost work." In contrast, OTPs connect teachers and students for longer periods of dynamic interaction that can potentially last several months if not years. Unlike traditional language teaching and learning in physical classrooms, but like customers in many gig economy contexts, students using OTPs have an incredible amount of power in selecting and personalizing their teachers. In the same vein, the gig economy allows language teachers to use their entrepreneurial skills to market their services in ways that were, hitherto, not possible.

Political Economy and Language Education

The transformations taking place in education as a result of global economic systems have been studied by sociolinguists for several decades, though few empirical studies have examined the ways in which the gig economy shapes language teaching (cf. Author, year). Despite this gap in the literature, the broader observations made within the study of political economy and language education are relevant to the current investigation, such as the work of Block (2017), who warns of the problems associated with how economic systems negatively influence how teachers and students position themselves in relation to the English language (see also Ricento, 2015; Heller, 2010). Of particular relevance within this existing body of work is the observation that economic systems anchored to hyper-competition lead to language teaching and learning becoming interwoven into the discourses and ideologies of neoliberalism. As a result, language teachers are frequently viewed as forms of capital whose professional value is

calculated primarily in relation to the income that they are likely to generate for a school or institution (Jenks, 2018). Similarly, market-centric attitudes in language teaching and learning encourage students to view their learning experiences in relation to the financial and career benefits that are likely attached to becoming proficient in a target language (Gao, 2016).

Although much has been said in recent years about language education and political economic forces, there is still much to be explored in relation to how teachers and students ostensibly harness their agency and power as linguistic entrepreneurs within the context of neoliberalism (De Costa et al., 2016). For example, do language teachers treat themselves as forms of capital within the gig economy, adopting the same discourses and ideologies used by schools and institutions to calculate "market" value?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to explore how neoliberalism and linguistic entrepreneurship are studied in the literature. Shin and Park (2016, p. 443) characterize neoliberalism as "an economic doctrine that valorizes individual entrepreneurial freedom and marketization of society." However, they go on to note that neoliberalism is also characterized by a transformation of individual subjectivity (p. 444). That is, neoliberalism affects how people see themselves and their places in the world, invariably orienting individuals to embrace self-responsibility and a dogma of self-entrepreneurship. De Costa et al. (2016, p. 695) stress:

> [An] entrepreneur should not necessarily be understood in the narrow sense as someone who starts her own business. Most, if it not all, identities (e.g., employee, educator, student and citizen) nowadays tend to be filtered through the lens of entrepreneurship.

Marketing teaching services on OTPs is highly entrepreneurial, and can thus be defined through the lens of linguistic entrepreneurship as the strategic exploitation of "language-related resources for enhancing one's worth in the world" (De Costa et al., 2016, p. 696, emphasis in the

original). That is, linguistic entrepreneurship is an "ethical regime" (De Costa et al., 2016 p. 701) that is tied up with individuals' evaluations of not only their economic, but also moral worth (Park, 2010). While the linguistic entrepreneurship literature has hitherto focused on "language learning as a moral imperative" (De Costa et al., 2020, p. 2), the gig economy provides opportunities to examine how teachers participate in these neoliberal endeavors. For instance, OTP customers (i.e., learners) are often "exploiting language to serve in the construction of a specific persona" (De Costa, 2016, p. 696), which teachers capitalize on by marketing themselves in ways that appeal to the sensibilities of students.

The present study thus contributes to the linguistic entrepreneurship literature by exploring how teachers (or entrepreneurs in the literal sense of the word) appeal to students (whose motivations are contoured by neoliberal aspirations). Furthermore, the theoretical and pedagogical implications of OTPs are understudied within language teaching in general, and linguistic entrepreneurship in particular. Notably lacking are studies that approach OTPs from either a linguistic entrepreneurship or gig economy perspective. For example, while Manegre and Sabiri (2020) examine instructors' attitudes towards the merits of teaching online, their investigation is not concerned with how such belief systems are a result of, and feed into, neoliberal aspirations. In a study that explicitly addresses OTP teacher profiles, Author et al. (in press) explore how nationality, qualifications, and native speaker status function as organizing concepts in the online language teaching market. Missing from these accounts, however, is a systematic analysis of the various branding strategies that teachers employ to foreground particular teacher characteristics.

Method

The Study

Understanding how teachers commercialize their experiences and identities within the gig economy requires examining a representative sample of teacher profiles on a single platform, as OTPs vary in what and how information must be included in a profile. Profile requirements make comparisons across different platforms difficult, especially during these early stages of conducting gig economy research. Here, it is also important to note that OTPs differ substantially in the degree of autonomy that their teachers possess. The platform from which the current study is based (LanguaSpeak) is relatively "open" with teachers given a wide degree of latitude over what material to include in their lessons and how much money to charge students. The autonomy that LanguaSpeak grants its teachers extends to what information they should include in their self-introductions. As a result, teacher profiles primarily reflect unique discursive strategies, making LanguaSpeak an ideal platform for studying teachers' self-branding discourses in the gig economy.

The corpus of data consists of 50 randomly selected "native" teacher profiles and 50 randomly selected "non-native" teacher profiles from the LanguaSpeak platform. Although native and non-native are highly problematic categories (Dewaele, 2018), the corpus of data was built according to this binary, as it reflects both the platform's technical interface (which allows students to filter instructors according to whether a teacher is a "native speaker") and students' own categorization of English instructors (Author, 2020). Furthermore, native and non-native are terms built into teacher profiles: flags, for instance, are prominently displayed near profile photos, indicating country of origin (which students can also use to filter instructors via the platform's search function). Although flag and country of origin are not always reliable indicators of nativeness in a language, their inclusion in teacher profiles reflect societal (mis)conceptions about who is deemed a native speaker of a language.

The corpus of 100 profiles was built in three steps: (1) English was selected as the target language, (2) the filter category "native speaker" was used to create a group of native-only teachers from whom 50 teachers were randomly selected; and (3) 50 "C2" (i.e., non-native) teachers were randomly selected from the general population of teachers. The classifications and nationalities of the teachers are displayed in Table 1. The constant turnover of teachers, as well as the opaque nature of the search-filter algorithm, make it impossible to ascertain if the sample presented below are completely representative. However, repeated searches over time indicate that the sample in Table 1 is broadly representative of the platform.

The study took place as part of a larger, interdisciplinary and multi-author study into online language teaching platforms. The study was reviewed by a University Institutional Review Board. Data, analysis, and writing took place throughout the first half of 2021. The authors were familiar with the platform due to the first author's ongoing research about the industry, which includes collaborating with LanguaSpeak to distribute a survey-experiment (Author, year). All names used when presenting the findings are pseudonyms, and information revealing personal details has been omitted from the data excerpts.

[Table 1 approximately here]

The Platform

LanguaSpeak is a popular online language learning platform that facilitates paid tutoring in many languages. As of January 2021, it boasted more than 5 million users and more than 10,000 active teachers. Because the platform eschews complex algorithmic matching, students generally select teachers using a set of search filter categories. These search filter categories include lesson costs, scheduling availability, other languages spoken, and teacher type (i.e., "professional" or "community" teacher). Professional teachers possess language-specific

credentials (e.g., TESOL or CELTA certificate). In contrast, community teachers do not need any form of formal credentials, but must demonstrate an ability to speak English at a C2 threshold, as outlined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Language.

Teacher profiles are essentially identical in design. Students initially encounter a photo of the teacher, a flag next to this photo, an instructor rating (almost all teachers have a perfect 5-star rating), and the price of a lesson. Next to this information is an embedded video introduction (usually 1-2 minutes). Below the video introduction, the profile includes a short (typically around 2 paragraphs) written self-introduction. As mentioned above, LanguaSpeak allows teachers considerable latitude in creating their profiles. Profile guidelines do not differentiate teacher-type (professional and community) and native-speaker status (native and non-native), but rather offer generic suggestions, such as "You must speak all the languages that you want to teach" and "Be natural—do not read directly from a script!" The profiles also feature testimonials from a teacher's previous students, though nearly all of these are exceedingly positive.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is anchored to the economic theory that neoliberalism celebrates, and indeed requires, workers to individualize their services (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Gig economy workers are similarly forced to increasingly embrace the logic of personal branding (Gandini & Pais, 2020). Unsurprisingly, many gig economy spaces, including OTPs, are designed so that service providers can market their individualism.

The practice of self-branding is a fundamental aspect of neoliberalism, creating "a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital" Khamis et al. (2017, p. 191). Teacher profiles reflect this neoliberal tendency, requiring discursive skills to project and

sell "brand" qualities. Such skills and competences are understood from three analytic perspectives: self-editing, authenticity, and cosmopolitanism.

(1) Self-editing refers to the self-branding strategy of selecting individual qualities and attributes for public consumption. Self-editing practices are well-documented in online contexts (e.g., dating; Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006), in which individuals purposefully choose information about themselves to either include or leave out (Toma, Hancock & Ellison, 2008). A strong incentive to strategically craft profiles also exists in OTPs, though the reason for self-editing in online teaching is economic. Unlike in traditional occupational settings, in which schools are responsible for branding their teachers, OTPs require individuals to develop and use marketing strategies that communicate directly to students. As a result, self-editing is a defining feature of gig economy work, as online teachers must compete against countless others with similar backgrounds and qualifications. Simply put, teacher profiles are motivated by ideology.

(2) Authenticity is a positive attribute associated with being real, true, natural, or original. Although what is authentic in language teaching is a subject of considerable debate (e.g., Seargant, 2005; Lowe & Pinner, 2016; Pinner, 2016), authenticity is to varying degrees of explicitness present in teacher profiles. That is to say, the language of teacher profiles attends to issues of authenticity, which reflects larger belief systems (including those of students) regarding what it means to be an authentic speaker or teacher of a language. As Banet-Weiser (2012) contends, under neoliberalism, authenticity itself is a tool of branding. Because students cannot meet their teachers face-to-face or verify their credentials personally, authenticity plays an important role in the context of OTPs. That is, teachers who can signal their authoritative claims to a language are particularly well-positioned to attract students.

(3) Cosmopolitanism is the tendency to orient oneself beyond the boundaries of the

community to which one belongs. Cosmopolitanism can be understood as "an intellectual and aesthetic openness towards divergent cultural experiences" (Hannerz, 1996, p. 103, as cited in Vertovec, 2000 p. 6). In practice, however, cosmopolitanism is often viewed as elite practices involving not only travel, but also knowledge of foreign foods (e.g., Cappeliez and Johnston, 2013) and languages (e.g., De Costa, 2019; Garrido, 2017). That is, the term is strongly associated with the competencies and practices of the transnationally mobile middle and upper classes (e.g., Bühlmann et al., 2013) and the appreciation of high—rather than popular—culture (Jenkins, 2006). Teaching profiles reflect cosmopolitan aspirations and belief systems in that they are, by and large, discursively constructed according to the idea that learning a language will unlock a world beyond that which is constructed within a student's particular national imagination.

The theoretical framework introduced above is operationalized using a discourse analytic approach. A discourse analytic approach is appropriate for analyzing teacher profiles because it offers a way to "systematically describe the various structures and strategies of text or talk, and relate these to the social, political or political context" (van Dijk, 2000, p. 35). Specifically, a discourse analytic approach is used to make connections between self-branding strategies in the emergence of online teaching platforms and broader neoliberal discourses circulated within societies.

The analysis of 50 native and 50 non-native teachers started with documenting the general and personal information of each profile, including language expertise, country of origin, and nationality (see Table 1). The analysis then examined the discourses produced within each teacher profile. Although these profiles are multimodal and multidimensional, the video introductions and written self-introductions are the focus of analysis, as both aspects of the

profile offer the most information to students about who their prospective instructor is and what they can offer. We read each profile's self-introduction and watched each teacher's self-introduction video, taking extensive notes about the profile material, including the content of the teachers' written and recorded self-introduction, as well as the style, setting, and tone of the videos. The authors then came together to compare notes and discuss our findings. The collaborative and iterative analysis of the data continued until each profile had been examined and discussed several times.

Results

Four self-branding discourses emerge through the analysis of teacher profiles. Namely, instructors brand their services by emphasizing some combination of their educational and occupational qualifications, authenticity as language teachers, life experiences and interests, and nativeness or non-nativeness in English. These self-branding discourses are discussed below in their own subsections, which are titled: (1) the professional teacher, (2) the cosmopolitan teacher, (3) the "authentic" teacher, and (4) the multilingual teacher.

The four self-branding discourses are not mutually exclusive: an instructor may draw on all four discourses within a single autobiographical account, and nearly all profiles examined (over 90%) rely on one self-branding discourse, such as nativeness, to express another, such as authenticity. Further, native teachers lean heavily upon their cultural (and racial) identities. In contrast, non-native teachers, including those with professional qualifications, foreground their pedagogical qualifications. It is important to note that these differences emerge most starkly when one examines within, rather than across, teacher categories. That is, community teachers are less likely than professional teachers to stress their professional qualifications (which they

often lack). Such differences require further empirical attention beyond the scope of the present study.

The Professional Teacher

Many teachers, especially those that are categorized as non-native teachers by the platform, brand themselves as professionals. For example, Sarah, from Europe, spends much of her self-introduction video stressing the myriad professional experiences she has had, including telling potential students about the wide variety of Cambridge courses that she is certified to teach. She recounts her credentials through a variety of professional and technical acronyms, such as IGCSE, PET, KET, and FCE. She begins by thanking viewers for watching her video, in which she "introduce[s] my teaching practice." Sara explains:

Since 2016, I have taught in several secondary schools in London, delivering courses like Cambridge International GCSC, English as a Second Language and also other Cambrge English qualifications. For example, Key English test, Preliminary English, and First Certificate. In addition, I also taught students GSCS English language, and supported them to improve their grade by using differentiated learning materials.

Prospective employees in virtually all types of markets signal their professional competence via certifications and educational credentials (e.g., Spence, 1973; Conelly et al., 2011). However, such signaling practices, which reduce employer uncertainty and increase employees' credibility, are recognized by scholars as especially crucial in the gig economy (Kathuria et al., 2021).

A similar focus on professional qualifications is echoed by a different a non-native teacher from the Middle East. In this video, Sassan, highlights his education and TEFL certification, as well as his longevity in the education field.

I'm a TEFL and CELTA certified English teacher. I've got a BA in English

Language and Literature and I've been professionally teaching for over 18 years.

I've taught all age groups, in language centers, universities and international

schools.

Sassan adds credibility to his services by explaining that he has taught in multiple non-Western countries and has helped students prepare for a range of standardized tests, including "TOEFL ibt, IELTs, and IGCSE," Within the gig economy, credibility is an important discursive resource because trust is often difficult to establish when there are thousands of service providers branding themselves in similar ways (Kathuria et al., 2021).

Through extensive analysis of teacher profiles, it was discovered that non-native teachers rely heavily on their pedagogical experience—even when they do mention personal information, such as hobbies. For example, Janice, a non-native teacher from Asia, quantifies her credibility by stressing the amount of professional time she has accumulated.

Hello! This is Janice. I love travelling, reading, as well as learning and teaching

languages. I've been teaching Chinese over 13 years, and the learners include

both children and adults. The total teaching hours is over 10,000 hours. I am

holding 2 certificates of both Teach English as a Second Language and Teaching

Chinese as a Second language.

Janice's description of herself is typical of many teaching profiles on this OTP. Although there are efforts to personalize her profile and perhaps convey a cosmopolitanism ethos, Janice's self-branding relies most heavily on a discourse of professionalism. Thus, while she begins with a general description of her cosmopolitan interests—in this case, reading and traveling—she transitions into a discussion of professional qualifications. The reference to over 10,000 hours of

experience and two professional certificates is an effort to establish her experience and credibility—such signals are of particular importance to teachers relatively new to the platform, such as Janice, who has given fewer than 250 lessons on the platform and must therefore build up her customer base.

Crucially, the self-branding discourse of the "professional teacher" was utilized by those teachers designated by the platform as "professional" and "community" That is, even teachers who are designated as community teachers due to lacking a teaching credential may still—though to a lesser extent—draw upon this discourse. For example, see Anastasia from Russia, introduced below in the subsection titled "the multilingual teacher." While self-branding strategies that reference pedagogy and experience are associated with non-native teachers, the corpus of data revealed that native teachers appear to rely more on their personhood, including most noticeably their cosmopolitan ethos.

The Cosmopolitan Teacher

A cosmopolitan ethos is a recurrent thread that runs through many teachers' self-branding efforts. Cosmopolitan branding discursively constructs teachers as well-traveled and cultured individuals. Consider Jessica and Eric, two native teachers that rely heavily on their non-pedagogical, cosmopolitan attributes in their branding discourses.

(Jessica)

*I'm from England and I'm a Professional language teacher. I started teaching English five years ago and I have a Cambridge English language Teaching certificate. I have taught all ages and all levels in Mexico, England and Bolivia. I am currently living in Mexico city and I **absolutely love it**. In my spare time, I enjoy visiting galleries, painting, reading, eating delicious food and playing vinyl records*

(Eric)

"Hi my name is Eric and I am from Wellington, New Zealand. English is my first language and my passion. Dreaming to be a writer, I completed my bachelor degree in English literature and furthered my education in Spain focusing on translating Spanish medieval literature. Alongside my career as a teacher, I have worked as a property auctioneer, appeared in radio shows and am currently working on my first novel…

The branding discourses above do more than simply introduce Jessica and Eric. They discursively construct a community of cosmopolitan practice, represented through living abroad and via cultural hobbies, such as "visiting galleries," "playing vinyl records," and "translating Spanish medieval literature." These discourses communicate shared, though not necessarily identical, values, such as the desire to travel. In so doing, teachers can relieve the psychological stress that students may experience when purchasing services (e.g., Matzler et al. 2011) by exploiting community values which can help ensure customers that they are making the right decision (Levy, 1959).

Cosmopolitan branding discourses are highly effective in online spaces, as the practice creates value beyond merely a functional level. For example, learning a language is the functional value of purchasing an online lesson, which all OTP instructors offer. However, cosmopolitan branding creates value beyond the functional level (i.e., market value) by communicating the virtues of travel and culture:

*I'm here on LanguaSpeak because I would like to help you improve your English by having interesting and fun conversations. **If, like me, you** love traveling, experiencing other cultures, visiting museums and art galleries but also being in nature, reading all sorts of books and learning news things, we will have lots to talk about.*

Rosa frames herself as a cultured and fun individual rather than as a pedagogically qualified teacher. She offers students a discourse of possibilities, or more specifically the chance to be like her, participating in a community of individuals that travel, immerse themselves in other cultures, and visit cultural spaces.

A different, but no less compelling form of cosmopolitan "community branding" is harnessed by George, a native-English speaker living in Scandinavia. George's video introduction opens with his name overlaid onto the screen, followed by a montage of him engaged in various daily activities, including taking a walk. The video's opening shots foreground his charismatic smile and his free-flowing hair. In the background, guitar music plays, and when the video transitions to George playing the guitar, the viewer understands that the music in the background is being played by George himself. Although he begins by mentioning his experience teaching English abroad, George quickly moves to discussing his cosmopolitan experiences:

> *I'm also a musician. I play guitar and sing, and I've toured around the world with my various bands, [visiting] the US, Japan, and Europe **many** times."*

George uses a voice-over to relate his experience as a professional musician. While he talks, scenes from different music videos play, each depicting him playing the guitar. George's "about me" section mirrors his introduction video, highlighting his experiences as a bona fide rockstar who has "played concerts all over the world from the US to Japan and all over Europe." While George is a professional teacher (and CELTA certified), his cosmopolitan ethos, conveyed through his experiences as a well-traveled professional musician, helps distinguish him from other teachers. As a distinct branding strategy, cosmopolitan ethos also likely appeals to learners

themselves, many of whom may be motivated to learn foreign languages by their own cosmopolitan aspirations (e.g., Abelmann et al., 2009; Duff, 2017).

A cosmopolitan ethos may also reflect teachers' life circumstances, especially those living in foreign countries and learning foreign languages. Such life choices partly reflect a desire to live a nomadic lifestyle teaching English along the way. Teacher profiles that reflect such aspirations are often written by native teachers who embrace working online so that they can continue to live an ostensibly cosmopolitan lifestyle, unfettered by a 9-5 job. In contrast, non-native teachers are more likely to be living in their country of birth; if living abroad, then such teachers are more likely to be doing so through a program of formal study or long-term employment.

The Authentic Teacher

Authenticity is crucial for successful self-branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012) and is a common discourse for both teacher types investigated in this study.

> *Hello, my name is Derrick. I currently live in Colorado, in the **United States**, where I was born and I speak standard **American** English. I love talking about languages and cultures and I can help you with standard **American** English pronunciation, grammar, spelling, and much more. Studying English with me will allow you to be understood by any speaker of **American** English, as well as English speakers from other countries. We can talk about books, movies, history, or any other subject that might interest you.*

Derrick stresses his identity as an "authentic" speaker of English, highlighting repeatedly that he speaks American English and that he was born in the United States. Then, rather than identifying his pedagogical approach, he notes that he will be happy to discuss "any subject" that interests potential students. Derrick's offer to talk about "any subject" is an appeal to a wide

audience, reflecting the self-branding dilemma that gig workers face: teachers must appear authentic while simultaneously appealing to the "lowest common denominator" (Whitmer, 2018, p. 5). Derrick's decision to exclude his qualifications or pedagogical approach may suggest that he lacks these credentials. However, such omissions can also be interpreted as a self-branding decision. That is, it may be that Derrick, recognizing that he is unable to compete with teachers like Sassan in terms of qualifications, utilizes a self-branding discourse of authenticity, grounded in his claims to offer an authentic "American" English learning experience of any subject matter.

Native teachers also draw heavily on their ostensible authenticity. Brad, an American "professional" teacher who has given more than 4,000 lessons, conveys authenticity via the titles that he assigns to the courses that he offers, which include: "Mastering the American accent" and "The United States of Brad English Course." Although nationality is often used as a resource to claim authenticity, such claims extend beyond ethnic and racial boundaries. For example, Brad—perhaps seeking to contrast his style with that of more pedagogically traditional lessons—promises "no more boring classes" and assures students of his quality as a teacher by telling them: "language is my life."

Similar self-branding strategies are employed by Andy, a White community teacher from England currently living in South America.

> I'm from London, UK, and currently living on the coast of Guatemala. I'm a **passionate** language learner and teacher and want to share my experience and **passion** with you and help English learners of all levels meet their targets. So, what can I do for you? I offer you the chance to practice your English with a **friendly**, **native** speaker. Frequent conversation with a **native** speaker is one of the most, if not the most, important things you can do to accelerate your English level.

Andy stresses his authenticity through his status as a native speaker of English, and further conveyed via his "passion" and "friendliness." Although Andy's primary focus is his personality and native speaker status, he adopts a cosmopolitan ethos: he states he loves to "travel" and "meet new people." This use of authenticity and cosmopolitanism stands in contrast to the discourse of professional qualification, which again is significantly more quantifiable, and signaled through certificates and employment history or expressed via explanations of specific pedagogical interventions.

While discourses of authenticity are important in other pedagogical contexts, gig teachers have the added pressure of high levels of competition, which creates an expectation to differentiate themselves from other teachers. In addition, many OTPs have few formal verification or quality assurance measures, forcing students to directly evaluate and appraise the qualifications of a potential teacher through self-branding discourses. Authenticity is particularly important with regards to teachers' claims to being native speakers or "friendly," since these attributes evade easy verification.

The Multilingual Teacher

The analysis of profiles above indicate that native and non-native teachers differ in the degree to which they draw upon their professional qualifications, authenticity, and cosmopolitan ethos. However, it is possible that these differences are not linked to nativeness, but instead reflect other differences between teachers. This analysis can be done by examining how multilingual teachers brand their native and non-native languages. For example, consider Anastasia, a "community" teacher from Russia who teaches both English and Russia on LanguaSpeak. Although she is not categorized as a professional teacher of English on the

teaching platform, Anastasia's self-introduction for her English classes stresses her pedagogical experience and academic qualifications.

> *I'm currently a student at the Higher School of Economics, and there I study Chinese. In the past I've studied English and French so I know how hard it is to really feel comfortable speaking in a foreign language, because I recently moved to America. I've taught English for over 4 years now. I know how to help a student to improve their English. Whatever your specific needs is, I can you help you with that, whether it's grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or general conversation practice.*

As she starts her introduction video in English, she displays next to her on the desk three books (each propped up so that its title strategically faces the viewer): *The Norton anthology of American literature*, as well as English translations of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*. Here, in purposefully displaying artifacts of "high culture," Anastasia self-brands herself as embodying a cosmopolitan ethos. Anastasia also inserts a photo of her university, Moscow's Higher School of Economics, complete with the school's logo, which brands her as educated and intellectual.

Directly following her introduction in English, Anastasia introduces herself in Russian, advertising her abilities as a Russian "native" teacher. Anastasia's introduction of her Russian lessons differs from her English self-introduction in several important ways that reflect specific issues of self-editing and authenticity. Once again, books are displayed and their presentation is identical to her English introduction (i.e., propped up so that the book titles are visible). However, this time the books have changed: the first book is titled "Voices," written in Cyrillic with the front cover adorned by a Matryoshka doll, a symbol commonly associated with Russia and traditional Russian culture. Anastasia's spoken script for her Russian classes is initially

similar to that of her English lesson, with her once again mentioning the foreign languages she

has studied, as well as where she goes to school. However, the photo of her school is now

replaced by a photo of Moscow's skyline. And this time, she discusses her hobbies: yoga,

cooking, and traveling, with each hobby accompanied by a representative stock photo. In

addition, her Russian language introduction is more informal: at one point, she inserts a popular

internet meme of Jackie Chan.

Through the literal self-editing of her introductory video—via the overlay of photos and

memes—Anastasia creates two different brands for her Russian and English lessons. In

advertising her English-speaking skills, Anastasia calls attention to her educational credentials,

and also signals her cosmopolitan ethos. In contrast, her branding of Russian draws upon her

authenticity and her connections to "Russianness" communicated through the image of

Moscow's skyline.

The different self-branding strategies Anastasia uses to brand her English and Russian

lessons demonstrate how teachers creatively utilize their identities and biographies within the gig

economy. Having introduced the four self-branding discourses identified in this study, we now

turn to a contextualized discussion of OTPs and their implications for applied linguistics.

Discussion

Language instructors have long drawn on popular language ideologies in combination

with their ethnic and racial identity in the pursuit of employment in language teaching (Jenks,

2017; Jenks & Lee, 2020). When multilingual teachers on OTPs assert claims to nativeness, they

likely benefit from language ideologies that link language to nationality, and nationality to race

(Author, 2020). While this study did not investigate teachers' self-branding strategies over time,

the language used in the videos (such as mentioning the number of lessons they have given on

the platform) indicates that some teachers update and edit the self-branding strategies on which they draw. In other words, the pressure under which gig economy language teachers are placed is constant, and they must continuously recalibrate their self-branding strategies.

While applied linguists have noted similar marketization trends due to neoliberalism (e.g., Park & Wee, 2013; De Costa et al., 2016; Shin & Park, 2016), the gig economy is rapidly restructuring the language teaching market towards repetitive, one-off, and short-term engagements that results in teachers being forced to ceaselessly self-brand. It is likely that the self-branding discourses identified above will evolve, or also multiply, as teachers pursue increasingly specialized niches within the rapidly growing gig economy for language teaching.

Interestingly, the findings in this study mirror the self-presentation strategies observed in an earlier study: Chang (2019) found that private language academies in Taiwan present themselves as "an expert in English language teaching," and "a bridge to the world" (p. 454). That OTP teachers' self-branding discourses overlap with those of private academies is unsurprising; the teachers examined in the present study function as independent private academies. That is, the gig economy environment creates an obligation to exploit human capital, forcing teachers to become "companies of one." As such, OTP teachers are responsible for their own curriculum, workspace (i.e., home office), infrastructure (i.e., broadband Internet, computer, webcam, etc.), and marketing (i.e., the textual descriptions, photos, and introductory videos that teachers must upload). These responsibilities represent an enormous outlay of both time and money, and adds to the pressure teachers experience in their quest to attract students. Teachers who are unable to see themselves as private companies are likely to fail in the gig economy. On the other hand, teachers who embrace such self-branding practices are poised to outperform their more pedagogically qualified peers.

The self-branding practices identified in this study are not unique to English teachers. For example, many learners of the Korean language are attracted by Korean pop culture (e.g., Pickles, 2018) and these student interests are reflected by how Korean teachers on OTPs brand themselves. Many Korean teachers on LanguaSpeak draw on discourses of cultural authenticity. One Korean teacher, for instance, stages her video amongst the glitz and glamor of downtown Seoul, shooting her self-introduction video directly in front of the subway station exit of Seoul's trendy Gangnam district (the namesake of the viral song *Gangnam Style*). A different Korean teacher starts his high-production-value introductory video with an artistic opening shot that pans across a beautiful pagoda. Later in the video he includes scenes from a concert and entices students by suggesting that they will be able to practice K-pop with him.

While the findings above are based on what teachers do, self-branding discourses are shaped by both supply (teachers) and demand (students) forces. While teachers are brands, students' motivations to acquire language skills are themselves linked to the neoliberal pressure to brand themselves as multilingual, and thus competent, workers (Heller, 2010; Park, 2016). The acquisition of linguistic and cultural competence become personal selling points that students can leverage and which signal students' recognition of their own latent human capital.

However, widespread fears exist regarding online platforms creating a "race to the bottom" where fierce competition from globally dispersed workers leads to spiraling prices (Graham et al., 2017). Furthermore, online platforms operate in regulatory gray zones that do not require them to pay any form of minimum wage (Prassl, 2018), leaving teachers with little to no protection from exploitation and unethical workplace practices. These issues were recently brought into focus when it was revealed that, under the auspices of a $450-million-dollar national tutoring program, the United Kingdom's Department of Education was employing 17-

year-old tutors in Sri Lanka for as little as $2.18 dollars-per-hour (Weale, 2021). Such practices

reflect the realities of the gig economy in general, and online tutoring in particular. An

abundance of cheap labor pushes wages down and forces teachers to engage in self-branding

discourses.

Although online teachers experience job insecurity and low wages, OTPs provide highly

customizable learning experiences for students. For example, students can select a teacher who

shares similar hobbies, which may aid in building rapport and increasing motivation. However,

these advantages incur their own set of worrisome pedagogical implications. For example, the

pressure for teachers to stand out from other instructors may result in making promises that,

pedagogically speaking, are not beneficial for students. Thus, while students may benefit from

their teacher's high level of responsiveness and individualized attention, there are no quality

control measures to ensure that what is being taught reflects good pedagogical practice. Further,

because teachers are under exorbitant pressure to please their customer base, they may be less

likely to correct students, both in terms of language (e.g., grammar and pronunciation), but also

with regards to incorrect and offensive cultural stereotypes. Indeed, teachers may feel the need to

play up cultural stereotypes (e.g., their "authenticity") in order to attract and retain students,

reinforcing problematic misconceptions regarding language competence and nationality.

Another threat to pedagogical quality on OTPs is teacher exhaustion. Some teachers

work extremely long hours; this can be verified by dividing the amount of time a teacher has

been registered on LanguaSpeak by the number of lessons that they have given. Like their gig

counterparts in other industries—such as Uber (Mason, 2018)—teachers have little incentive

protect their personal time. Further, teachers who appear to teach less may be moonlighting as

online teachers in addition to jobs in brick-and-mortar schools, or be registered on multiple platforms (Author, year).

Despite the neoliberal pressures that teachers on OTPs face, the platforms can provide new and important professional benefits. For example, OTPs may play an important role in facilitating non-native (and non-white) English teachers to work as English teachers by allowing them to bypass biased gatekeepers such as private institutes (Author, year). In addition, OTPs allow teachers to avoid commuting to a physical workplace, which can greatly benefit teachers who are disabled, have child or eldercare responsibilities, or who are located in remote areas. In other words, OTPs need to be assessed critically and with recognition that their impacts on teachers differ according to a wide range of criteria, including not only native speaker status but geographic location, disability, family status, and race. The industry continues to develop, and its implications—only beginning to emerge—will change as business models and technology continue to change and evolve.

Conclusion

The gig economy continues to transform key service industries, including English language teaching. The rise of digital platforms has created a market in which individual teachers are forced to compete directly with each other. Because the market for online teaching is large, individual teachers are compelled to strive to differentiate themselves from their peers. This process often takes place through self-branding strategies that seek to marketize not only pedagogical capabilities, but also what would normally be considered private attributes, including hobbies, experiences, and even aspects of their personality. In addition, teachers, and in particular those teachers who lack professional qualifications, draw on aspects of their personal experiences and personality to attract potential students.

Although the self-branding practices identified in this study can be connected to broader trends of neoliberalization discussed previously (e.g., De Costa et al., 2016, 2020), these discourses represent a specific and intensified form of marketization that stem from the gig economy, which has received very little attention in applied linguistics research. By demonstrating how neoliberal pressures play out in the gig economy for language teaching, this article contributes to research on neoliberalism within applied linguistics, and also contributes empirical findings concerning the emergence of an important and growing domain of language education. Needed next is research that demonstrates how new forms of technological mediation (e.g., the use of algorithms for matching students and teachers) shape this rapidly growing industry. Future research should also draw directly on interviews to offer insights into how students and teachers understand their experiences learning and teaching in the gig economy.

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